

The Early Buddhist Archaeology of Myanmar: Tagaung, Thagara, and the Mon-Pyu Dichotomy

Elizabeth Moore

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Local Geographies: North, South and Peninsular¹

The commonly cited 19th century AD *Glass Palace Chronicle* is primarily a narrative of *Anyā* or Upper (*Ah-htet*) Myanmar Buddhist places. These start with Tagaung and then Sriksetra (Tharehkittara), leading to the rise of a complex state at Bagan (Arimaddana). This does not mean that every element of the landscape bespoke canonical Buddhism. Quite the contrary, for then as now, an eclectic range of structures and objects that we today label Buddhist and Animist, shaped and articulated man's relationship to the lived-in world. Lower Myanmar is absent from the chronicles' "upper-centric" royal legitimating narrative. However, without the ballast of the south (*Auk-Myanmar*) and the Tanintharyi peninsula, Upper Myanmar sites such as Tagaung would have been far more vulnerable to political competition between Yunnan, Tibet, and Beijing. For example, expansion of the Han dynasty (200 BC–200 AD) included incursions against the "southern barbarians," with mention of a Tibeto-Burman speaking people called the Pyu (P'iao or Tircul) living beyond the

¹ The upper, lower and peninsula regions are defined here as: (1) areas north of about 18° N near Pyay (Prome) in the present administrative areas of Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing Divisions and the western edge of the Shan State plateau; (2) those from *circa* 16–18° N bordering the Gulf of Muttama (Martaban) in the present day administrative areas of Ayeyarwaddy and Bago Divisions and the Mon and Karen States; (3) the southern peninsula of Tanintharyi (Tennaserim Division) from *circa* 10–15° N bordering the Andaman Sea on the west and the Thailand border on the east.

frontier.²

From the southern provinces, links to the maritime trade routes brought other competition and powerful new state-forming ideas. First millennium AD Buddhist sites such as Thagara at Dawei, like Tagaung, however, have no Pyu inscriptions. Nonetheless each has unique artifacts that highlight active trading profiles. The fruits of maritime contributions not only distinguish the southern coast and peninsula from the Upper Myanmar polities, they were a necessary part of the formation of the whole. Although a north centre-south periphery operation of power generally characterizes the early historic periods of Myanmar, the south provided an essential ecological and territorial complement to the land wealth at the heart of the *Ah-htet* lineage of place in royal chronicles.

The central point of this distinction is between the controls implicit in “centre” versus the mutual participation of dialogue. In short, a “north” exists only if there is a “south.” The similarity and differences, between Tagaung and Thagara underlines the inseparability of material culture from the local ecology. As only Tagaung is included in the country’s traditional lineage of state, their artifact parallels also highlight the convoluted power relations implied the selections of sites (and gaps) in the chronicle renditions of the transition from prehistoric to historic periods.

A brief summary of the author’s view of landscape alteration is given below to support not only my comment above on the inclusion and absence of sites with similar artifacts, but also my appeal in the end of this paper to replace the current Mon-Pyu north-south dichotomy with a more complex lineage of place illustrated in Fig. 1.

Ecology and Buddhist Landscape Alteration

Myanmar (28° 31' to 9° 58' N) is twice as long north to south (2051 km) as it is east to west (936 km), with Tagaung (23°05'N, 96°01' E) *circa* 1050 km north of north of Thagara (14°04' N, 98°11' E). From north to south, the mountains parallel the Ayeyarwaddy (1130 km), Chindwin (644 km), and the Thanlwin (Salween, 241 km south of the Shan Plateau). The Thanlwin continues south along the peninsula, matched on the west by the Sittaung (322 km).

As with the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, seasonal wind changes bring dry and cool weather to Myanmar from the northeast in October to April, but from May to September, southwest winds carry eighty percent of the annual precipitation. Within Upper Myanmar, the most dominant ecological factor is aridity. This increases as one moves north, so that for the sites of Thagara Sriksetra, Beikthano, and Halin at

² The meaning given to “P’iao” varied from “rebel” in early Tsin Dynasty texts to “cavalry” in later T’ang accounts (Aung Thwin, 2005: 14).

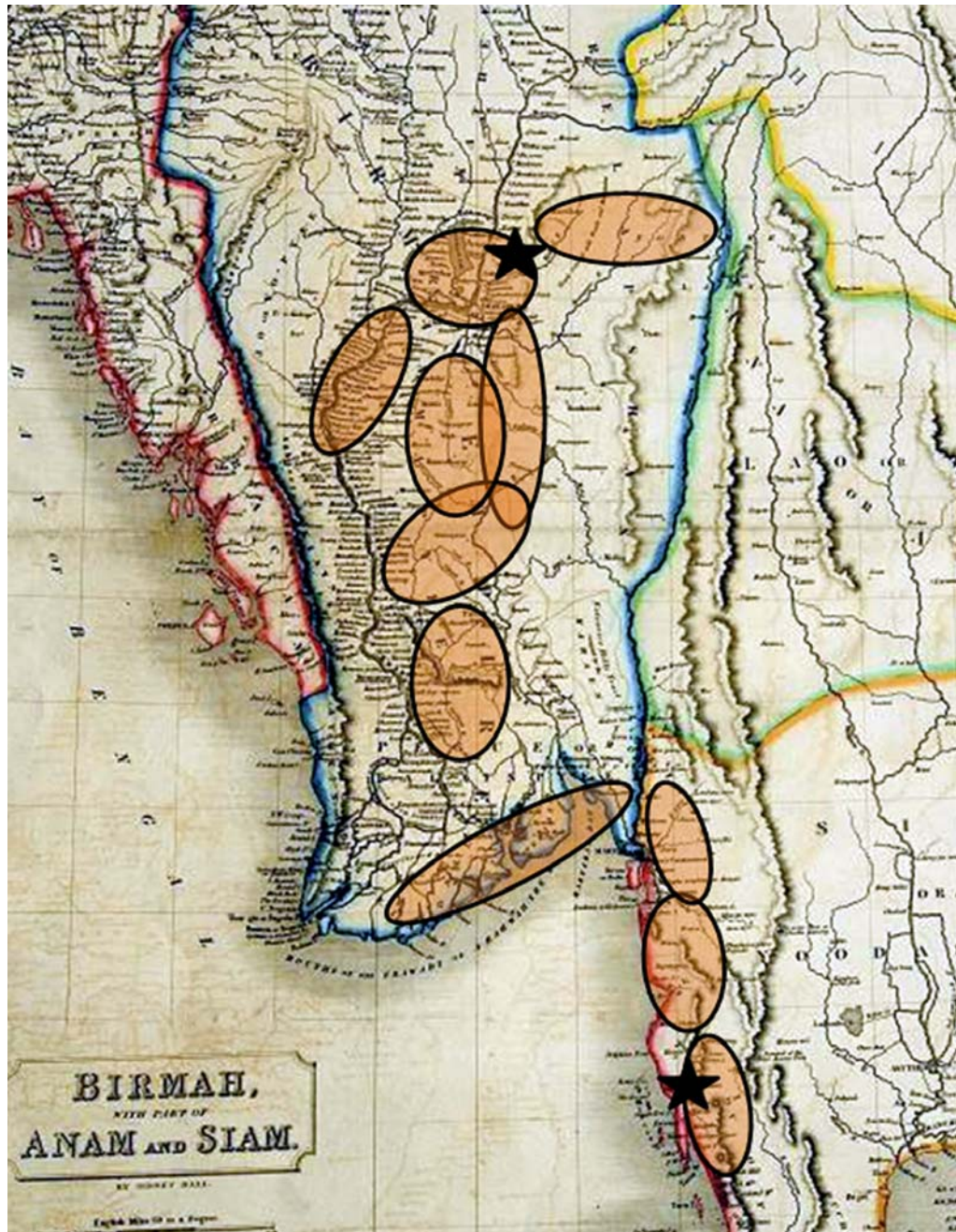


Fig. 1: Localized cultures in the first millennium AD. Tagaung and Thagara are starred in the north and peninsular south (after Moore, 2007: 8)

approximately 16°, 18°, 20° and 22° N respectively, there is on average 5000 mm, 1250 mm, 870 mm and 750 mm rainfall per annum.

By *circa* 10,000–2000 BP many of the major river valleys of Myanmar appear to

have been settled and by the undated Neolithic (*circa* 3500 BC?), sites have been documented adjacent to streams (*chaung*), seasonal lakes (*in-gyi*) and ponds (*in-aing*). With the appearance of bronze in the valleys of the Chindwin (*circa* 1500–700 BC) and bronze-iron in the Samon (*circa* 700 BC–400 AD), settlements continue to be located near water sources such as these and varied ore deposits. From the Neolithic to Bronze-Iron eras, settlements adapted to the local ecology but there is no major terrain modification. This changed, however, with the advent of a Buddhist elite, integrated into or imposed upon earlier kinship groups. These new communities triggered landscape alteration seen in the construction of walled sites, increased resource exploitation, production specialization, and widening trade networks. Thus while spaces continued to structure societies, the imprint of man on the landscape provides a significant record of the ritual, social and political transition from *circa* 200 BC to 900 AD.

Tagaung

Setting

Tagaung is a triple-walled site on the east bank of the Ayeyarwaddy that chronicles place seven hundred years before the birth of the Buddha Gotama (*circa* 1300 BC). Evidence of probable Neolithic and Bronze Age habitation has been documented from surface finds including a range of stone tools and socketed bronze implements up to 18 cm in length from the village of Kyan Hnyat, 30 km south of Tagaung.³ The Second Tagaung Dynasty is placed in the early Han period of expansion noted earlier with social memory of the likely instability of these times perhaps retained in the story of Maung Pauk Kyaing (Thado Naganaing), a commoner who becomes king after killing a serpent (*naga*).⁴ As described below, both chronicle eras are compatible with artifacts from the site.

³ Collection U Tin Win Oo; Kyan Hnyat; Chit San Win, 2005; Moore, 2007: 127, figure.

⁴ A currently venerated and repaired shrine within the original habitation area enclosed by Wall 1 (19 hectares) perpetuates this tale. In the Tagaung version of this common scenario of the union of a local chthonic spirit with an outsider, the hero is local and the chthonic spirit is from the teak and ruby mine area of Mogok to the east of Tagaung. In 1997, an urn with bones and ash was found in front of the *Naga* shrine. The round-bottom pot (22 cm high, 17.5 cm wide) contained a bronze ring (2.4 cm diameter), five bronze bells (1 cm diameter) and eight terracotta spindle whorls (2.5 cm diameter). There were also numerous beads, four tooth-shaped iron pieces and an iron ring (1.7 cm diameter). Other urns with similar contents have been documented since 1997 at Hsin Hnyat and at TG31 within Wall 2 (62 hectares, called Anya Bagan). The outer enclosing Wall 3 (204 hectares) is south of Wall 1. In the author's view, the *naga* tale may reflect Tagaung domination of Mogok area (or the reverse), with Mogok being a significant source of not only gems, but timber, elephants and routes to China. For details on the *naga* shrine, the urns and chronicle history see Brown, 1926: 111–12; Chit San Win, 2005: Win Maung (Tampwaddy): 47, map, Pot no 3; Maung Tin and Luce, 1921: 32; Htin Aung, 1959: 87–92; Pe Maung Tin and Luce, 1960: 6.

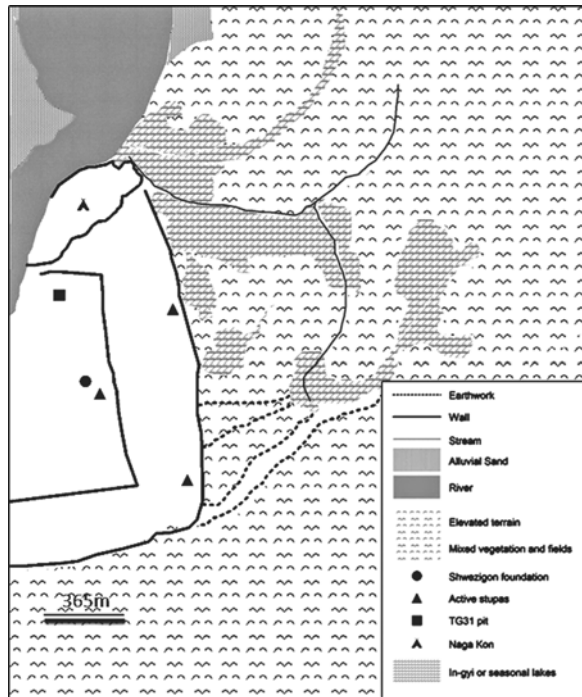


Fig. 2: Sketch map showing walled area of Tagaung,

To the north and northwest of Tagaung is copper, gold-rich river sand and iron along the Meza and jade mines along the Uru.⁵ Along the Ayeyarwaddy, gold-washing was common in recent years, with silver mines to the east at Bawdwin and Yadanatheingyi at Namtu around Mogok, and copper and more gold found along the edge of the Shan Plateau.⁶ These resources bolstered the trading advantages of the walled site's riverside location. East of the walled area, varied ecozones support crops ranging from edible oils to rice and coriander (see Fig. 2). Winter rice or *mayin* is grown on the edges of shallow pools on the shelf between the Ayeyarwaddy and *Indaing* forest on Thaung Hwet Taung, a range southeast of Tagaung. Pheasants, partridge, toucans, pelicans, Saurus

cranes, and fish live around and in seasonal lakes or *in-gyi* and tall swamp grass areas. Tigers, elephants, banteng (*Saing*), gaur, and deer were once common, with wild elephants from the upland areas around Mogok held at Hsin Hnyat, 3.5 km south of Tagaung, and timber at Kyan Hnyat, 30 km south of the walled zone.⁷ Areas east of the walled area of Tagaung and sites to the south along the Ayeyarwaddy thus offered ports, upland resources, and a strategic site in relation to Yunnan. This last aspect prompted the construction of a number of Bagan-period structures, with excavations up to 1997 yielding only Bagan-period evidence.⁸ However, in 1997–2006, a number of pre-Bagan objects were unearthed at Tagaung and Hsin Nnyat, including votive

⁵ Hudson, 2004: 57, fig. 5.

⁶ San Win, 1997; Win Maung (Tampawaddy), personal communication, August 2006.

⁷ San Win, personal communication, August 2006, George, 1981: 13–14, 51.

⁸ Department of Archaeology excavations in 1967–1968, 1992–1993 and 1997–1999 of mounds named TG1–21 all contained brick structures and artifacts dated to the Bagan era seemingly invalidating chronicle histories (Moore and Nyunt Han, 2007). The few dateable Tagaung pieces like images of the Buddha and votive tablets were consequently used in a circular argument to attribute other surface finds to the Bagan period. Than Tun notes for instance that as excavations at Tagaung yielded evidence mostly of the 12th century AD, that all pottery found at Tagaung dates to the same period (Than Tun, 2003: 10).



Fig. 3: Burial urns at site TG31 (courtesy Chit San Win)

tablets, stamped pottery, roof tiles, and end-pieces.⁹ In addition to the urn noted above within Wall 1, another from TG 24 within Wall 2 contained stone and terracotta beads, iron rings, and spearheads.¹⁰ Also within Wall 2 was a rescue operation at site TG 31 that brought to light urns, stamped pottery, finger-marked bricks, and a range of other objects.¹¹ The TG31 pottery, with twenty-five of the 80+ pots from the site having distinct stamped motifs, is of particular note as

the shape and the decoration is different from pots from Pyu sites such as Beikthano and Sriksetra.

The Tagaung pots are round-bottom bowls, urns, and water vessels. Many of the urns are egg-shaped vessels without stamps but Vessel 11, which contained the bones of an entire human skeleton, is baluster-shaped with three rows of 66 anthropomorphic stamped motifs on the shoulder (see Figs. 3, 4).¹² Ranging from 10 to 40 cm in height, the Tagaung urns are similar in size to Pyu vessels, and likewise appear grouped, possibly by lineage.¹³ Apart from size and clusters, however, Tagaung pottery is very different from Sriksetra, Beikthano, and Halin examples. Nor do Tagaung pots fit within a Pyu-urn typology of bowls, globular, betel box, and pots with high narrow necks.¹⁴ A few Beikthano and Sriksetra urns are footed but most have rounded or flat

⁹ The Hsin Nynat work focused on uncovering a brick platform (SNK1), a building (SNK3) and a linear feature (SNK2) (Chit San Win, 2004; Pandita Nanda (Tagaung) et al., 2006).

¹⁰ Moore and Nyunt Han, 2007

¹¹ The excavations, to 1.8 meters, would thus have been circa 2.5 to 3 meters below virgin ground level. These defined four levels, the lowest underlain by a brick 'floor' with finger-marked bricks (author's discussion with villagers, June 2008; Chit San Win, 2005: 71, 98–102; Moore, 2007).

¹² Vessel 11 (38 cm high) from TG31 is stamped with a 2.5 cm diameter motif of a four-armed crowned figure with flanking bull and elephant. The figure has prominent eyes, knees flexed, and feet touching in a near triangle shape. Urn contents, in addition to the bones and ash, included one 1.5 cm bronze shell-like bell, 12 terracotta "beads" (2–2.4 cm diameter), beads of quartz, carnelian, and black stones, and bronzes such as a plain ring (2.4 cm) and another of coiled wires (5.6 cm diameter), and an iron object (8.7 cm wide) (Chit San Win, 2005: 75).

¹³ Chit San Win and Win Maung (Tampawaddy) personal communication, December 2006. Stargardt noted clustering of urns Beikthano (KKG9 and KK11), comparing this to bronze drum burial clusters in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, and likening the shape and decoration to Heger I and Karen bronze drums. The hypotheses are worth bearing in mind given the Tagaung links to Yunnan discussed here (Stargardt, 1994: 133; 1990).

¹⁴ Hla Tun Pru, 2003.

bottoms. In contrast, there is a short flared foot on a minor but consistent percentage of Tagaung pottery. In addition, most urns from Sriksetra and Beikthano are fluted with flat lids and a central stem, while the Tagaung lids are rounded with knob-like stems.¹⁵ Although Sriksetra, Halin, Beikthano, and Maingmaw urns may have



Fig. 4: Anthropomorphic stamp on Pot 11 (courtesy of Win Maung)



Fig. 5: Tagaung crescent roof-tile eaves (courtesy of Chit San Win)

horizontal lines of geometric patterns or bosses, only a few are stamped with a single row of motifs such as *Kalasa*, *Srivatsa* and *Bhaddapitha*.¹⁶ Tagaung vessels have one to three rows of round stamped motifs, 0.6 to 0.75 cm across, on the widest part of the vessel shoulder such as a bull, stamped 20 times on Vessel 1 from Hsin Hnyat. Motifs are encircled by radiating lines, not the single lines of Pyu vessels, creating a sun-like burst akin to vessels ranging from Hastinapura's early centuries AD chronology to much later pottery from Bagan.¹⁷ In short, the Tagaung motifs are not like Beikthano and Halin, with only a few similarities in some of the floral designs.

Although inhumation burials have been found with urns at Halin and Beikthano, none have yet been recorded at Tagaung. Sriksetra, Beikthano, and Halin urns have ash, bones, silver coins, a few gold pieces, and beads. In contrast, Tagaung urns include grave goods of iron, silver, gold, bronze, copper, shell, bone, terracotta, semi-precious stone, and glass. Some of these, such as bracelets, rings, lids, swords, brackets, and rivets are rare or not seen in Pyu urns.¹⁸

¹⁵ Tagaung vessels are also different from flat bottom possible urns documented by Win Maung (Tampawaddy) at Shagwe, a fortress of Halin (Hudson, 2004: 138, 170, fig. 97; Moore, 2007).

¹⁶ Aung Thaw, 1968, figs. 41, 45, 71; Myint Aung, 2003. Four sherds with human figures have been recorded: one dancing, another seated and three wearing crowns (Aung Thaw et al., 1993: 57, 90; Hla Tun Pru, 2003: 85).

¹⁷ There has been little work on Bagan pottery, primarily surface finds assumed to be contemporary with the monuments rather than earlier phases of structures. For Hastinapura motifs see Lal, 1954: Plate XXXI, nos. 3, 7, Plate XXXII, no 16. For Bagan motifs see Than Tun, 2003: 10–11, figs. 12, 13.

¹⁸ Hla Tun Pru, 2003: 79; Hudson, 2004: 145; Moore and Nyunt Han, 2007.



Fig. 6: Tagaung round roof-tile eaves
(courtesy Chit San Win)

In addition to the unique Tagaung urns, crescent and round roof tile end-pieces from Hsin Hnyat (SNK1) are distinctive (see Figs. 5, 6).¹⁹ Similar roof tiles and end pieces dated to the 1st to the 3rd century A.D. have been recorded at Trakieu and Go Cam in central Vietnam and likened to early first millennium AD Chinese styles of the Tsin and Han. Some Go Cam round end-pieces bear faces, dated to the 3rd century AD in relation to raids against “southern barbarians,” an

outgrowth of persistent flux between Chinese and local rule in central Vietnam after the fall of the Tsin in 206 BC.²⁰

A final Tagaung find with no known parallels at Pyu sites is a horde of fifty small (4-6 cm in diameter) round votive tablets recovered in 2003 (Type 2 tablet shown in Fig. 7). The tablets were found under a deposit of Bagan period tablets 1.5 meters below ground level. All bear a single figure of the Buddha in *Bhumisparsa* mudra, and have been classified according to the surrounding motifs.²¹ One tablet of Type 2 was recorded in earlier excavations and dated to the late Bagan period. With the larger sample, scholars continue to debate their dating.²²

¹⁹ Crescent-shaped end-pieces were 15 to 20 cm high, 21 to 26 cm wide and 1 to 1.5 cm thick. A central vertical band divides the crescent, each section with a tri-lobed festoon and dotted border (Chit San Win 2004, p.165–166). Round end-pieces were 1 to 4.5 cm thick, 13 to 20 cm diameter with a rim 1 to 3 cm wide. The wide rim “frames” them in the same manner as votive tablets (Guy, 2002: 24). The round pieces have 10 to 15 thin sun-like rays or radial lines, in some cases tipped with circular raised dots arrayed around a central spot. While two round end-pieces have been recovered from Sriksetra, these are closer to a lotus pattern. This is also seen in round end-pieces from Linzhang, Hebei province, dated to the Northern Dynasty (386–589 AD) (Yang, 2004: 96d).

²⁰ See Southworth, 2004: 214. This seemingly was also the case in western Yunnan, annexed during the reign of the 6th Han Emperor, Wu Ti (140–86 BC). Tribute missions from Myanmar at this time brought pearls, vitreous objects, and rare stones, although those bearing gifts may have changed during this period as earlier groups in Yunnan dispersed towards the west and south (Taw Sein Ko, 1913: 16–17). In 225 AD, the Wei general Chu-ko-liang is said to have used bronze drums to frighten “savages” by placing them in torrents to strike like military watch-drums at regular intervals (Hudson, 2004: 31; Kyaw Zin, n.d.).

²¹ (Type 1) Oval halo, takeh or throne back and up to eight surrounding stupas; (Type 2) Filled with the medicinal *gamon*, an aromatic tuber of the ginger (*Kaempferia*) family; (Type 3) Two small stupas and enclosing lines, the outer marked by *beindu* dots (Aung Thaw et al., 1993: 187, fig. 2a, 205; Moore, 2007: 192, figure; Mya, 1960a: 50, pl. 67; Pandita Nanda (Tagaung), 2006).

²² Based on the crossed *Vajrasana* leg position with both feet facing upwards, some prefer an “early Bagan” or “late Pyu” label. Others note the difficulty of identifying *asana* given the small size and erosion to the tablets, so focus on the closeness of the feet to the torso, the rounded abdomen and absence of a triangular face that suggest 4th to 5th century AD Gupta rather than 11th to 12th century AD Bagan



Fig. 7: Tagaung votive tablets, Tagaung Museum

In fact, there is not a great stylistic distinction between the debated “early Bagan” versus “late Pyu” labeling for the votive tablets. With style put in to rigid Pyu, Mon, and Bagan ethno-linguistic and political categories, however, the individuality of different sites is often lost. This issue is raised again in the following description of Thagara located more than a thousand kilometers south of Tagaung.

Thagara

Despite legends of a visit by the Buddha to 432 BC, Dawei chronicles put the founding of Thagara a thousand years later, in the middle of the eighth century AD (116 ME). Dawei chronicles include the sage Gawinanda, a tale of a prince Maung Nwa (Mr. Bull) who becomes a *Yatheit*. He eventually fathers two children, born of a Ngakoma fish *nat*. The children, Shin Zaw and Shin Zan, enshrine Sacred Hairs (*Hsandaw*) at Thagara and Shin Dhat-weh, and Shin Zan is crowned king of Thagara.²³ The Gawinanda legend clearly draws on a variety of sources, but as with the *naga* tale cited earlier for Tagung, may carry memory of the transition from ancestral to Buddhist culture during the first millennium AD.

Setting

Thagara is an oval-shaped walled site located 11.6 km north of Dawei, at the same latitude as Bangkok. The site had river access on the east via a stream, the Padat Chaung, on the south of the walled site and sea access via a mountain pass to Nabulei

or Pala influences. (Win Maung (Tampawaddy), personal communication, 23 December 2006).

²³ Moore and Than Swe, 2006; Than Swe, 1996: 53



Fig. 8: Thagara walled site (Google Earth)

Chaung, some 20 km west.²⁴ There are up to four walls at Thagara: two outer rounded ones (1600 x 1100m) enclosing the mound and two inner quadrangular walls (745 x 640m).²⁵ There has been only one preliminary survey and excavation of the site by the Department of Archaeology in 2001.²⁶ The Kayat Pyin cultivation area on the east of Thagara has yielded a number of artifacts, including beads, glazed pots, and bronzes. The southeast wall has a short snout-like extension, capped with a 150m

long angular earth and brick construction (see Fig. 8). Water ponding in the dry season indicates that this was once the course of the Padat Chaung providing portage to the Dawei River.

Artifacts

The beads, pottery and sculpture of Thagara illustrate the site's local production and trade networks. Beads include finished and unfinished pieces, round and oval spheres, tubes, biconical shapes, and flat ovals *circa* 2mm to 2.3 cm. They are made of green and blue glass, carnelian, and other semi-precious stones. The tubular beads are opaque with a dull surface, deep red or terracotta, yellow brown, milk white, cream, sky blue, and dark blue in color.²⁷

²⁴ Traditional accounts state that the "original" Dawei peoples lived thousands of years ago at the egress of this stream. The word "Dawei" refers to the city, the region, and the local dialect, a highly intonated variant of Tibeto-Burman of unknown antiquity. Words found in Bagan inscriptions account for ten per cent of the vocabulary, with sixty-five per cent being independent Dawei (Aye Sandi, 1999).

²⁵ Moore and Aung Myint, 1991, map 11; Survey 09.05, 04.06.

²⁶ Two brick structures were unearthed, both with underlying levels not yet excavated: SGR1 (8 x 6.4m) oriented to the northeast and SGR2, a (10m) rectangular building with an entry on the east, front hall and four small cells in a row at the back (Moore, 2007: 221, figure). The structure, due to the small size of the bricks and the layout has been attributed to the late sixteenth-century AD and has been rebuilt repeatedly, indicated by a different alignment of the entry hall, the presence of finger-marked bricks and two habitation layers in the 3.5m stratigraphy.

²⁷ Moore, 2007: 223, figures.



Fig. 9: Thagara image of the Buddha (13 cm high), Hpaya Gyi Museum, Dawei

In rice fields southeast of the walled site is the Myo Ko Kon cemetery where numerous terracotta urns have been unearthed at about 8-10 cm below surface level.²⁸ The pots are (15-50 cm in diameter and 11 cm in height) with the elongated neck *circa* 4 cm, marked with horizontal bands. Some of the urns are incised on the shoulder with twelve down-turned fig-leaf motifs similar to pots found at Twante (Khabin).²⁹ The rounded bottom, long neck, and vertical designs resemble sun-dried and low-fired pots made today in the Ohlo-byin quarter of Dawei used in the April water festival. The pots, found in groups of three within a bed of black soil or ash, contain small beads, ash, and bones. Unlike Pyu urns from Upper Myanmar sites with many beads and silver coins, the Thagara urns have only one to five small blue, deep violet or red glass beads, 1mm thick and 2mm in diameter.³⁰

While the terracotta urns described above point to local production, glazed pots underline the peninsula's long trading history with Thailand, including a line of six Tak princes who ruled Dawei during the 10th century AD. One glazed vessel, possibly linked to Tak production of a somewhat later period, is a globular flat-bottomed vessel made of red clay, with a pale greenish yellow glaze (18 cm height, 8.5 cm diameter). The vessel is ovoid with the body of a small mammal draped over the top (see Fig. 10).³¹ The bronzes from Kayat Pyin are mostly sculptures and at least one, an image of the Buddha (13 cm) seated in *pralambanāsana* is a local production. The image is may have a high percentage of lead, or copper, with its style similar

²⁸ Moore and Aung Myint, 1991: 93.

²⁹ Luce, 1969: I,20; Moore, 2007: 220, figure.

³⁰ Moore, 2007: figures on 138, 220–221.

³¹ Than Swe, 1996.

although somewhat cruder than 6th to 9th-century Dvaravati pieces.³² Another image from Kayat Pyin shows links to 10th to 13th century images from Sri Lanka and in the style of the throne, possibly Java (see Fig. 11).³³



Fig. 10: Pot with mammal (18 cm high), Than Swe (Dawei) Collection

Another “Pyu” trait at Dawei are the stupa and *Makara* votive tablets found at the walled site of Mokti. Similar tablets have been recorded at Sriksetra and in Rakhine.³⁴ Two larger tablets (12.5–14 x 10 cm) also from Mokti show a central image of the Buddha seated on a double lotus throne. The right hand is in *Bhumisparsa* mudra with a small bowl held in the left hand. Four bulbous stupas flank the image, two on either side. The head is framed by a narrow arch seen in a few tablets from Sriksetra.³⁵ The stupa tablets may have reached Dawei overland, for similar tablets are found at Yarang in Pattani province. At Yarang, they were linked to finds of a number of *stupikas* with one tablet inscribed in Sanskrit in Pallava script and dated to the 7th century.³⁶ Given the varied locations where the tablets are documented, they may have moved in both east and west directions across the peninsula and from south to north along the peninsula.

³² The same posture is seen in an image of the Buddha (13 cm) from Beikthano and another from Twante (Luce, 1985: II, 76(b); Moore, 2007: 164)

³³ The image (7.5 cm) is seated on a finely made throne (11 cm) in the *Dhyani* mudra, bears a flame or *sirispata Ushnisha*, and has small flat hair curls. The throne has inward facing *Makaras* on the sides and a *Kirtimukha* at the apex. The image of the Buddha is close to those of the Polonnaruva period (993–1235 AD), in the folding of the *sanghati* and the flame *Ushnisha*. Similar thrones with images are seen in Rakhine, where they are attributed to the Late Polonnaruva (Gutman, 2001: 156–57; Listopad, 2003: 106–8).

³⁴ Examples of the *Makara*-throne tablet from Mokti (8.7 x 6.9 cm) depict the Buddha seated on a double elephant with *Makaras* flanking the throne. A rampant feline and a stupa flank the image on either side. Similar *Makara* figures are seen flanking the Buddhas on a large gilded silver reliquary casket from Sriksetra. For similar examples see Dupont, 1950: plate 497; Gutman, 2001: 57; Luce, 1985: plate 61a; Mya, 1966: plates 19–15, 22, 60b.

³⁵ The reverse of the paired stupa tablets is impressed with a leaf pattern, particularly deep on the central stem. Again, there are parallel tablets from Sriksetra (Luce, 1985: II, 61(a); Mya, 1966: fig 60).

³⁶ Pattaratorn has tentatively connected the tablet-*stupika* combination to the Caitayakanikaya, an offshoot of the Mahayanist Mahasanghikasnikaya (Pattaratorn, 2000: 183).

Conclusion: Ceremony, State and Place

Although future evidence may alter this hypothesis, the closest stylistic links to the Tagaung roof tile end-pieces are in China and central Vietnam. As illustrated by Tagaung's small round votive tablets, these ties shift to South Asia with the advent of Buddhist rule. Links to 6th to 9th century AD Dvaravati cultures of Central Thailand, 10th to 13th century AD Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, and maritime polities in Sumatra and Java, are highlighted by the Thagara local and imported images of the Buddha,



Fig. 11: Sri Lanka Polonnaruwa style image of the Buddha (Aung Nwe Collection)

beads, urns, and pots described above. Given the complexity and political oscillation implied by these varied styles, framing Tagaung and Thagara within categories of Pyu or Mon alone is at odds with the evidence. The contrasts and commonalities are too many for a simple separation.³⁷

In privileging one ethno-linguistic group such as Mon or Pyu in the formation of state, the deep-rooted changes needed to forge the first Buddhist geography of the country have been greatly neglected and overshadowed. As we are at the outset of documenting when and what happened, the depth of conceptual change in the spiritual beliefs of the populace remains conjectural. However, what is now clear is the centrality of a specific location within the cultural domain of a society.

This paper suggests that the role of “place” and the implied land control offers a new approach for understanding the ancestral to

Buddhist transition.³⁸ The relationship of Pyu and Mon is commonly interpreted geographically, as most Pyu inscriptions are found in Upper Myanmar and Mon inscriptions in Lower Myanmar. The Mon-Pyu dichotomy, however, confines ancient

³⁷ There is clear recognition of otherness, although not necessarily ethnic as has been suggested for various spirit legends of Upper Myanmar (Michio, 2000).

³⁸ To re-iterate, “place” or abode is defined here as chthonic beliefs seen in prehistoric ancestral and later Buddhist custody of a site.

territorial control within a modern, ethnic-bound concept of nation.³⁹ The Pyu came to be seen not only as the founders of the first *city* but the first *nation*. In Myanmar, dynastic lines are not ones of family but of city and place, with separate ceremonies for taking possession of the royal city and the palace.⁴⁰ The importance of these did not derive simply from their antiquity. Instead, like the site where successive Buddhas attained Enlightenment (*Bodhimanda*), the place is of permanent significance as a “victory ground.”⁴¹ As new Buddhist communities merged with or replaced prehistoric kinship allegiances, the varied human demography, while providing one catalyst for change, nonetheless remained immovably embedded in specific locations from Tagaung to Thagara.

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³⁹ On nation, see Taylor, 1987: 3. The process by which a few “Pyu” inscriptions have been interpreted as representing the birth of a “Pyu nation” was long ago detected and warned against by Blagden: “The evidence at present available seems to indicate that the *nation* which spoke the language of our text was a forerunner of the Tibeto-Burman movement into the southern parts of the Irrawaddy valley.... The name ‘Pyu’ has merely been attached to it as a convenient label, not improbable in view of Burmese traditional history, but by no means to be accepted as final” (Blagden 1919: 61; emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Miksic (2007: 440) notes that in the *Glass Palace Chronicle*, kings were listed by capital rather than dynasty, and that many were usurpers to the throne.

⁴¹ Myanmar *Aungmeh*, Pali *Jayabhumi*, see Tun Aung Chain, 2000: 124.

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